Seeing Dead People Not Known to Have Died: "Peak in Darien" Experiences

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SUMMARY *The ubiquitous belief that, after death, our consciousness might persist in some discarnate form is fueled in part by phenomena like near-death experiences (NDEs) and deathbed visions, mystical experiences reported on the threshold of death. Some NDEs, called "Peak in Darien" experiences, include visions of deceased people who are not known at the time to be dead. Cases of this kind provide some of the most persuasive evidence for the survival of consciousness after bodily death.* [Keywords: near-death experience, deathbed vision, after-death communication, survival of death, spirit]

> Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
> And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
> Round many western islands have I been
> Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
> Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
> That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
> Yet never did I breathe its pure serene
> Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
> Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
> When a new planet swims into his ken;
> Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
> He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
> Look'd at each other with a wild surmise –
> Silent, upon a peak in Darien.
>
> —John Keats, *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer,* 1817

The belief that, after the death of our physical body, our consciousness might persist in some discarnate form has been widely held in almost every culture. Although skeptics attribute such a belief to a fear of annihilation, it is fueled not only by our fears and wishes, but also more cogently by our experiences. Indeed, a wide variety of human experiences suggest to us that our consciousness may not cease when our bodies die.

Experiences that suggest postmortem survival include spontaneous visions of the deceased, particularly those involving interactive apparitions that communicate and converse responsively with the experiencer and often occur around the time of death. Often the deceased spirit appears to convey some meaningful message to the experiencer. Additional evidence of postmortem

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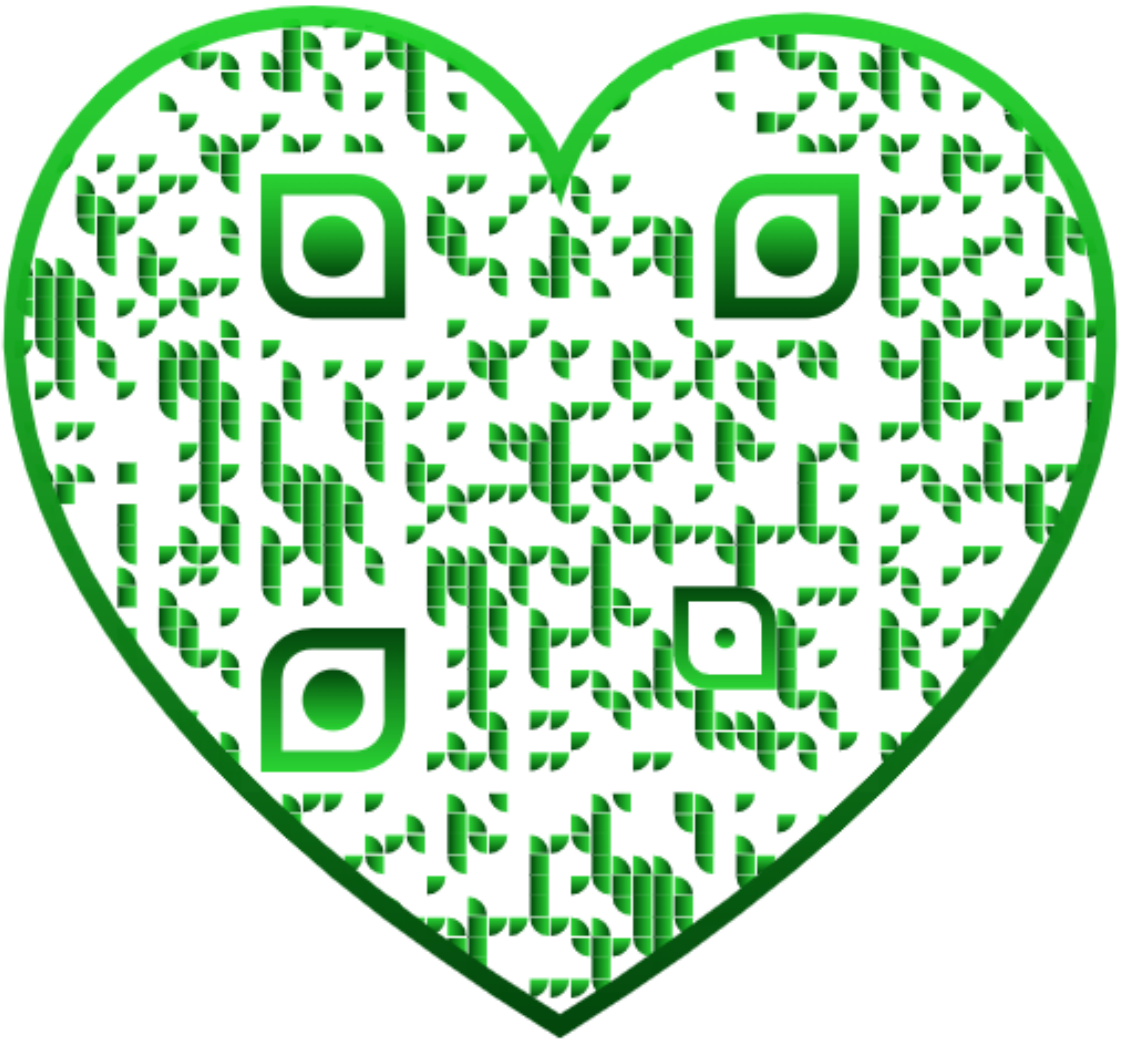

survival comes from "mediums," people who claim to communicate with deceased spirits on behalf of bereaved clients (Stevenson 1968, 1977). Although some mediumistic communications comprise vague messages that might apply to anyone or that seem to originate in the imaginations of the clients and the mediums, there have been controlled, double-blind studies in which some mediums have produced specific and detailed messages (Beischel 2007; Roy and Robertson 2001). Particularly intriguing evidence comes from "drop-in communicators," purportedly deceased spirits who appear unbidden during a mediumistic séance and unknown to the sitters or to the medium but, nevertheless, communicating messages that turn out to contain accurate information (Stevenson 1970; Ravaldini et al. 1990).

Additional evidence for survival of consciousness after bodily death comes from near-death experiences, or NDEs, the mystical or transcendental experiences that some people report when they have come close to death; and from deathbed visions, comparable phenomena that occur in the last moments of life. NDEs have been investigated widely over the past three decades, primarily with regard to their epidemiology, their psychophysiological correlates, and their effects on the lives of experiencers (Holden et al. 2009). Despite that focus on mundane aspects of NDEs, however, the main reason that these experiences generate interest among the general public is that they seem to provide evidence that consciousness can function independent of the human body and may, therefore, be able to survive bodily death (Serdahely 1989).

NDEs commonly include a number of phenomenological features, which suggest consciousness to be separate from the physical body, which in turn suggests it may persist after the death of the body (Kelly et al. 2000). The vast majority of near-death experiencers report that during the time that their brains were demonstrably impaired, their thinking, by contrast, was clearer and faster than ever before, as if the mind had been freed from the distractions and limitations of the physical brain. Such enhanced mentation is in fact significantly more common during NDEs in which proximity to death was well documented in medical records than during NDEs lacking such documentation (Owens et al. 1990), and includes increased speed, logic, and clarity of thought; overall visual and auditory clarity; vividness of colors; and control of cognition.

Among a large sample of near-death experiencers, 80 percent described their thinking during the NDE as "clearer than usual" (45 percent) or "as clear as usual" (35 percent); 74 percent described their thinking as "faster than usual" (37 percent) or "at the usual speed" (37 percent); 65 percent described their thinking as "more logical than usual" (29 percent) or "as logical as usual" (36 percent); and 55 percent described their control over their thoughts as in "more control than usual" (36 percent) or in "as much control as usual" (36 percent) (Kelly et al. 2007:386). For example, a 33-year-old man who had attempted suicide by overdose, in his drug-induced delirium started hallucinating small humanoid figures surrounding his body. As his condition deteriorated, he felt as if he had left his physical body and hovered above it. From this vantage point he watched his body looking around in puzzlement at the small humanoid figures. He himself, from his disembodied location, could not see those hallucinations—he was thinking and perceiving quite clearly—but he could see that his body was still hallucinating. By his account, his mind could function

much more clearly and was not subject to drug-induced hallucinations once it was liberated from the brain.

Furthermore, some near-death experiencers report accurate out-of-body observations that they could not have known about by normal means. For example, a 56-year-old truck driver who had an NDE during coronary bypass surgery, although fully anesthetized, claimed he left his body during the operation and watched from above, where he was surprised to see the surgeon "flapping his elbows as if trying to fly." When he later asked the surgeon why he had engaged in this strange behavior, the surgeon explained that he had permitted his assistants to start the surgery, and then he entered the operating suite to supervise them. Having "scrubbed in" and having been gloved and gowned, and not wanting to risk touching anything that was not in the sterile surgical field until he was ready to do the surgery, he placed his hands securely on his chest and motioned with his elbows to emphasize his instructions to the assistants (Cook et al. 1998).

In addition to out-of-body experiences, NDEs and related deathbed visions often include apparent encounters with deceased persons, but rarely with living persons. In our collection of 665 NDEs, 138 (21 percent) included a purported encounter with a deceased person, whereas only 25 (4 percent) included a purported encounter with a living person. This discrepancy is sometimes cited as evidence of postmortem survival of the persons seen, although it could also conceivably be attributed to the dying person's expectations of imminent death. Psychologist Emily Kelly (2001) contrasted the expectation hypothesis with the hypothesis that these visions reflect the continued survival of deceased persons. She noted that some features of these cases seemed equally compatible with either hypothesis. Other features appeared more consistent, however, with the survival hypothesis than with the expectation hypothesis, such as visions of deceased persons other than the one(s) the experiencer wished to see and visions of unidentified deceased persons. That is, the expectation hypothesis would predict that people facing death might be more likely to hallucinate figures identifiable as welcoming deceased loved ones.

There is one type of vision of the deceased that cannot be attributed plausibly to expectation, which challenges most directly the hypothesis that NDEs are subjective hallucinations and bears most directly on the question of the postmortem survival of consciousness. Some experiencers on their deathbeds see, and often express surprise at seeing, a recently deceased person of whose death neither they nor anyone around them had any knowledge, thereby excluding the possibility that the vision was a hallucination related to the experiencer's expectations.

Such NDEs have come to be called "Peak in Darien" cases, after a book by that name published in 1882 by Frances Power Cobbe (Murphy 1945:8). Cobbe took the title from a poem by John Keats (1994), reproduced at the beginning of this article. The poem describes the surprise of the Spaniards, who, upon climbing a peak in Darien (in what is now Panama), expect to see a continent laid out before them, but are faced instead with another ocean. Cobbe appropriated Keats's metaphor of the unexpected view from the peak in Darien to describe surprising visions of the dying, hidden from others at the deathbed:

> We have walked in company with our brother . . . through the wilderness of this world . . . and then we have begun to climb the awful Andes which have always loomed before us at out journey's end . . . and beyond them—the Undiscovered Land. We see our companion slowly approach the mountain's crown, while our lagging steps yet linger on the slopes below. . . . There breaks on his vision whatever there may be of the unknown World beyond. . . . Does our forerunner on the hilltop . . . behold, from his "Peak in Darien," an Ocean yet hidden from our view? [1877:374–375]

There are three varieties of "Peak in Darien" experiences that may vary in their evidential value. The first variety comprises cases in which the deceased person seen had died some time before the vision, although that death was unknown to the experiencer, as far as could be ascertained. The second includes cases in which the deceased person seen had died at the time of, or immediately before, the vision, thus not allowing any possibility for the experiencer to have learned of the death. Finally, the third type consists of cases in which the deceased person seen was someone whom the experiencer had never known. Reports of "Peak in Darien" cases are scattered throughout the literature, and they are often inadequately documented; but there are enough of them to warrant giving them serious attention. What follows is a representative sampling of some of the more illustrative cases of these three types from the published literature.

Cases in which the Deceased Person Seen Was Thought by the Experiencer to Be Alive

A 17th-century case of an NDE in which the experiencer saw a deceased person still thought to be alive was described in a pamphlet by Dr. Henry Atherton in 1680. Atherton's 14-year-old sister, who had been sick for a long time, was thought to have died. Indeed, the women attending to her saw no breath when they held a mirror to her mouth and saw no response when they put live coals to her feet. Nevertheless, the girl recovered and related a vision of visiting heaven, which her relatives dismissed as "dream or fancy" (Atherton 1680:2). The girl then insisted that she had seen several people who had died after she had lost consciousness. One of those she named was thought to be still alive; however, her family subsequently sent out inquiries and confirmed that the girl was correct.

As religious scholar Carol Zaleski (1987) pointed out in her comparison of medieval return-from-death stories and contemporary NDEs, the narrator's purpose in recording an experience frequently influences the range of phenomena described, as well as the interpretation of the experience. Atherton appeared to have published his sister's NDE as a cautionary morality tale, if we can judge by the full title of his pamphlet: *The Resurrection Proved: Or, The Life to Come Demonstrated. Being a Strange but True Relation of what hapned to M^{ris} Anna Atherton: Who lay in a Trance 7 Days, with her Speech when she came to life, As it came from her Brother, D^{r}. Atherton, Physician in Caermarthen. Published, now seasonably, in this Adulterous, Atheistical and Papistical Generation, wherein neither God, Christ, Soul, Heaven nor Hell are minded; but Whoring, Swaring, Lying, &c. and, it may serve as a Curb to Vice, and a Spur to Vertue* (Atherton 1680). Notably,

the particular focus of our interest, the girl's identification of a deceased person not previously known to be dead, was a peripheral detail not essential to the author's moral message. It is therefore unlikely that this detail was merely fabricated for its allegorical impact.

In the publication in which she coined the term "Peak in Darien" (1882), Cobbe described a woman who, as she was dying, suddenly showed joyful surprise and spoke of seeing three of her brothers who had long been dead. She then apparently recognized a fourth brother, who was believed by everyone present to be still living in India. One of those bystanders was so shocked by the fourth brother being seen that she "rushed half-senseless from the room" (Cobbe 1877:378). Sometime thereafter letters arrived announcing the death of the brother in India, which had occurred prior to his dying sister recognizing him.

In another 19th-century example, psychologist Edmund Gurney and classical scholar F. W. H. Myers reported the case of two brothers, ages three and four, who died of scarlet fever on successive days. Harry, the younger brother, died on November 2, and David, the older brother, died 14 miles away on November 3. David's family took care to keep him from knowing about Harry's death, and they felt sure that he did not know. Nevertheless, about an hour before he died, David sat up in bed and, pointing, said distinctly, "There is little Harry calling to me" (Gurney and Myers 1889:459).

Gurney and Myers also described the case of John Alkin Ogle, who, an hour before he died, saw his brother who had died 16 years earlier, calling him by name. Ogle then called out in surprise, "George Hanley!"—the name of a casual acquaintance in a village 40 miles away—before expiring. His mother, who was visiting from Hanley's village, then confirmed that Hanley had died 10 days earlier, a fact that no one else in the room had known (Gurney and Myers 1889:459–460).

In the early 20th century, logician and ethicist James Hyslop related the account of two schoolmates and close friends who both contacted diphtheria. Jennie, age 8, died on a Wednesday, a fact that was intentionally kept hidden from her friend Edith. At noon on that Saturday, Edith selected two of her photographs to be sent to Jennie, providing evidence that she still thought Jennie to be alive. Shortly thereafter she lapsed into unconsciousness, but that evening she awakened and spoke of seeing deceased friends. Then suddenly she said to her father, in great surprise, "Why, papa, I am going to take Jennie with me!" She then reached out her arms and said, "O, Jennie, I'm so glad you are here," lapsed back into unconsciousness, and died (Hyslop 1908:88–89).

There have been a number of additional cases published in the 20th century, although many of these reports have been rather brief. Philosopher William Barrett reported the case of a woman who on her deathbed saw her deceased father beckoning to her and said, with a puzzled expression, "He has Vida with him." The woman was referring to her sister, of whose illness and death three weeks earlier she had not been told (Barrett 1926:12–13).

More recently, Technicolor pioneer Natalie Kalmus wrote an account in a popular magazine, subsequently reprinted in several books, of her sister Eleanor's last moments, in which she began calling out the names of deceased loved ones whom she was seeing. Just before she died, she also saw a cousin named

Ruth and asked, "What's she doing here?" Ruth had died unexpectedly the week before, and Eleanor, because of her condition, had not been told (Kalmus 1949).

Psychiatrist Ian Stevenson described the deathbed vision of an elderly woman in the United States. When the doctors said that she did not have long to live, her grandchildren gathered around her bed. Suddenly she seemed much more alert, and the expression on her face changed to one of great pleasure and excitement. She raised herself slightly and said, "Oh, Will, are you there?" and fell back dead. No one named Will was present, and the only Will her family could recall was a great-uncle who lived in England. Not long after, her family received word from England that her brother Will had died about two days before her death (Stevenson 1959:22).

Robert Crookall reported the case of Horace Wheatley, who, while in a coma, felt himself "floating in an atmosphere of peace and serenity" where he was approached by a local government officer he knew well. His friend said: "Welcome Wheatley; I shall have to see you later," and then faded from view. Only after recovering from his coma did Wheatley learn from his wife that this friend had passed on (Crookall 1960:21–22).

Psychologists Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson wrote of a man who died in a hospital in Connecticut the day after his sister's death in Ohio. Before expiring, he mentioned seeing his sister Mary in his hospital room, although he did not know that she was dead (Osis and Haraldsson 1977:164)

Psychologist Kenneth Ring related the account of a man who experienced a near-death vision of two of his brothers, one of whom had been dead for years, while the other had died only two days previously—a fact unknown to the dying man. Only after he recovered from his near-death state did he learn of his brother's recent demise (Ring 1980:208).

Pollster George Gallup reported the case of a woman who announced to bedside witnesses, "There's Bill," immediately before dying. Bill was her brother, of whose death a week earlier she had not been told (Gallup and Proctor 1982:14).

Hospice nurses Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley wrote of a 93-year-old Chinese woman dying of cancer who had recurrent visions of her deceased husband calling her to join him. One day, much to her puzzlement, she saw her sister with her husband, and both were calling her to join them. She told the hospice nurse that her sister was still alive in China, and that she hadn't seen her for many years. When the hospice nurse later reported this conversation to the woman's daughter, the daughter stated that the patient's sister had in fact died two days earlier of the same kind of cancer, but that the family had decided not to tell the patient to avoid upsetting or frightening her. When her daughter then told the patient about her sister's illness and death, she relaxed, the puzzle solved, and she died at peace shortly thereafter (Callanan and Kelley 1993:93–94).

Callanan and Kelley also reported the case of two childhood friends who died around the same time, hundreds of miles apart. Steve, who lived in Boston, used to spend each summer at the family's beach house on Cape Cod, next door to his friend Ralph, whose family came each summer from Ohio. After college, their Cape Cod summers together and close friendship ended; they rarely got to

see each other, and, apart from Christmas cards, did not correspond. At age 27, an automobile accident left Steve paralyzed from the neck down. Unable to care for him at home, his family placed him in a nursing home, where he eventually succumbed to pneumonia. Weeks later a letter arrived from Ralph's widow in Ohio, saying that Ralph had died recently of cancer. Ralph had not known of Steve's paralysis or death, but in the last few weeks before he died, Ralph began to have visions. Just before he died, and just after Steve had died, Ralph said excitedly: "Oh, look! Here comes Steve! He's come to take me swimming" (Callanan and Kelley 1993:86–87).

Most recently, intensive care nurse Penny Sartori reported the vision of one of her hospitalized patients whose condition was so severe that his family was called to the hospital at 3:00 A.M. to say good-bye to him. At one point, he smiled and appeared to converse with someone no one else could see. He subsequently told his family that he had been visited by his deceased mother and grandmother, and also by his sister. His sister had died the previous week, but the family had made a point of not telling him for fear of setting back his recovery. He died a few days later (Sartori 2008:300).

Cases in which the Person Seen Died Immediately before the Vision

As suggestive as the above cases are, the lapse of time between the death of the person seen and the experiencer's vision permits speculation that the experiencer had known of the prior death, albeit unconsciously. That speculation is less plausible when the death of the person seen coincides with or immediately precedes the vision.

One of the earliest cases of a near-death experiencer seeing a recently deceased person still thought to be alive was published by Pliny the Elder, in Book 7 of his *Natural History* (1942[A.D. 77]). The account involves two noble Roman brothers, both named Corfidius. When the elder brother appeared to have died and stopped breathing, his will was opened, naming his younger brother as his heir. The younger brother then engaged an undertaker to arrange the funeral. The apparently deceased older Corfidius, however, stunned the undertaker by clapping his hands in a typical signal to summon his servants. He then awoke and announced that he had just come from the house of his younger brother. He reported that the younger brother requested that the funeral arrangements he had made for the now-revived older Corfidius be used for him instead, entrusted the care of his daughter to his older brother, and showed his older brother where he had secretly buried some gold underground. As the older Corfidius was relating the account of his NDE, his younger brother's servants burst in with the news that their master had just unexpectedly died; and the buried gold, of which no one else knew, was found in the place indicated by the revived older brother (Pliny 1942[A.D. 77]:624–625).

Some detailed cases were published in the 19th century in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research.* Eleanor Sidgwick wrote of an English gentlewoman, who was seeking someone to sing with some visiting children. She engaged Julia X, the daughter of a local tradesman, who was training as a public singer, to spend a week with them. When she left, Julia X told her father she had never had as happy a week. Shortly thereafter, Julia X married and moved away.

Six or seven years later, the gentlewoman who had engaged Julia X lay dying and was talking over some business matters, appearing "perfectly composed and in thorough possession of her senses." Suddenly she changed the subject and said, "Do you hear those voices singing?" No one else present heard them, and she concluded: "[The voices are] the angels welcoming me to Heaven; but it is strange, there is one voice amongst them I am sure I know, and cannot remember whose voice it is." Suddenly she stopped and, pointing up, added: "Why there she is in the corner of the room; it is Julia X." No one else present saw the vision, and the next day, February 13, 1874, the woman died. On February 14, Julia X's death was announced in the *Times.* Her father later reported that "on the day she died she began singing in the morning, and sang and sang until she died" (Sidgwick 1885:92–93).

Alice Johnson reported a case in which Mrs. Hicks, on her deathbed in England, had a vision of her absent son Eddie, who happened to be dying at the same time in Australia. A few days before Mrs. Hicks died, she looked earnestly at the door to the room and said to her nurse, husband, and daughters, "There is someone outside, let him in." Her daughter assured her there was no one there and opened the door wider. After a pause, Mrs. Hicks said: "Poor Eddie; oh, he is looking very ill; he has had a fall." Her family assured her that the last news they had heard from him was that he was quite well, but she continued from time to time to say, "Poor Eddie!" Some time after she died, her husband received a letter from Australia announcing their son's death. He had suddenly become feverish the day of his mother's vision and was found dead, having fallen from his horse at about the time of his mother's vision (Johnson 1899:290).

Several cases rich in detail were published in books in the 20th century. John Myers related the case of a woman who, in an NDE, perceived herself leaving her body and viewing the hospital room and saw her distraught husband and the doctor shaking his head. She reported that she went to heaven and saw an angel and a familiar young man. She exclaimed: "Why, Tom, I didn't know you were up here," to which Tom responded that he had just arrived. The angel then told the woman that she would be returning to earth, and she found herself back in the hospital bed with the doctor looking over her. Later that night, her husband got a call informing him that their friend Tom had died in an auto accident (Myers 1968:55–56).

More recently, psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross described a Native American woman who was struck by a hit-and-run driver on a highway and, before dying, was comforted by a stranger, who stopped his car to help her. When he asked her if there was anything he could do for her, she said: "If you ever get near the Indian reservation, please tell my mother that I was OK. Not only OK, but very happy because I am already with my dad." The woman died a few minutes later, before an ambulance arrived. The stranger was so moved that he drove far out of his way to the Indian reservation, where the mother of the victim told him that her husband had died of a coronary 700 miles away, just one hour before the car accident had occurred (Kübler-Ross 1983:208–209).

Kübler-Ross also described the case of a mother and two young sons who had been in an automobile accident. Kübler-Ross was attending to one of the sons and was aware that his mother had died at the scene of the accident. His brother Peter had not died but had been taken to a special burn unit in another

hospital because the car had caught fire before he was extricated from the wreck. Kübler-Ross's patient told her: "Everything is all right now. Mommy and Peter are already waiting for me." Then smiling, he slipped back into a coma and died. Kübler-Ross resolved to check on the brother in the burn unit, but as she passed the nursing station she received a call from the other hospital to inform her that Peter had died a few minutes earlier (Kübler-Ross 1983:210).

Psychiatrist Raymond Moody described the NDE of a man who was near death with heart problems at the same time that his sister was near death in another part of the same hospital in a diabetic coma. The man reported that he left his body and watched the physicians work from his vantage point in the corner of the room. Suddenly, he claimed, he found himself conversing with his sister, who was up there with him. As she began to move away from him, he tried to go with her, but she told him: "You can't go with me because it's not your time." Then she receded into the distance through a tunnel. When he awoke, he told the doctors that his sister had died, but they reassured him that she hadn't. At his insistence, they had a nurse check, and, in fact, she had just died (Moody and Perry 1988:136).

Callanan and Kelley described the case of Peggy, a young hospice patient dying of lymphoma. One day, she seemed to the visiting nurse much more bright, radiant, and active than usual. She reported that the previous day she had been drifting in and out of sleep, remembering back to a happy time in her childhood when she and her brother were taken in by a beloved aunt. She woke up with a start when she felt a warm, caring hand on her shoulder, and looking around behind her saw her aunt, who lived in another state, smiling and touching her. She felt her aunt with her off and on all day, and late that night her uncle called to say her aunt had died at the same time that she was first aware of her presence (Callanan and Kelley 1993:94–95).

Physician K. M. Dale related the case of 9-year-old Eddie Cuomo, whose fever finally broke after nearly 36 hours of anxious vigil on the part of his parents and hospital personnel. As soon as he opened his eyes, at 3:00 in the morning, Eddie urgently told his parents that he had been to heaven, where he saw his deceased Grandpa Cuomo, Auntie Rosa, and Uncle Lorenzo. His father was embarrassed that Dr. Dale was overhearing Eddie's story and tried to dismiss it as feverish delirium. Then Eddie added that he also saw his 19-year-old sister Teresa, who told him he had to go back. His father then became agitated, because he had just spoken with Teresa, who was attending college in Vermont, two nights ago; and he asked Dr. Dale to sedate Eddie. Later that morning, when Eddie's parents telephoned the college, they learned that Teresa had been killed in an automobile accident just after midnight, and that college officials had tried unsuccessfully to reach the Cuomos at their home to inform them of the tragic news (Steiger and Steiger 1995:42–46).

Cases in which the Deceased Person Seen was Unknown to the Experiencer

There are fewer published cases of the third type of Peak in Darien vision, in which the experiencer sees a deceased person that he or she did not know, because the unknown nature of the deceased person generally makes

verification difficult. In some cases, a near-death experiencer will encounter an unknown person that he or she later recognizes when shown photographs of deceased family members. The evidential value of these cases is decreased because the verification relies on the experiencer's own testimony that the unknown deceased visitor corresponds to someone in the photograph. There are nevertheless a few impressive examples of this type of case from recent decades.

Cardiologist Maurice Rawlings described the case of a 48-year-old man who had a cardiac arrest. In a NDE he perceived a gorge full of beautiful colors, lush vegetation, and light, where he met both his stepmother and his biological mother, who had died when he was only 15 months old. His father had remarried soon after his biological mother's death, and the experiencer had never even seen a photo of her. A few weeks after this episode, his aunt, having heard about this vision, visited and brought a picture of his mother posing with a number of other people. The man had no difficulty picking his mother out of the group, to the astonishment of his father (Rawlings 1978:17–22).

Kübler-Ross wrote of a girl who, after almost dying during heart surgery, said she had met her brother, who seemed familiar to her, even though she thought she never had a brother. Her father, very much moved by her testimony, told her that she did, in fact, have a brother, who had died before she was born (Kübler-Ross 1983:208).

Pediatrician Melvin Morse described the case of a 7-year-old boy dying of leukemia, who told his mother that he had traveled up a beam of light to heaven, where he visited a "crystal castle" and talked with God. The boy said that a man there approached him and introduced himself as an old high school boyfriend of the boy's mother. The man said he had been crippled in an automobile accident, but in the crystal castle he had regained his ability to walk. The boy's mother had never mentioned this old boyfriend to her son, but after hearing of this vision, she called some friends and confirmed that her former boyfriend had died the very day of her son's vision (Morse and Perry 1990:53).

Cardiologist Pim van Lommel reported the extensive NDE of a Dutch man who, during a cardiac arrest, saw his deceased grandmother and a man who looked at him lovingly, but whom he did not know. More than a decade after his NDE, his mother, on her deathbed, confessed to him that he had been born from an extramarital relationship, and that her husband was not his biological father. His biological father in fact was a Jewish man who had been deported and killed during World War II. She showed her son a photograph of his biological father, whom he immediately recognized as the man he had seen in his NDE a decade earlier (van Lommel 2004:122).

Conclusion

Humanity's perennial belief that some part of our personality may survive bodily death is owing to more than just wishful thinking and denial. It is also linked inextricably to common experiences that offer evidence for the postmortem survival of consciousness. Although these phenomena have been reported for centuries, they have become more prevalent as modern biomedical technol-

ogy has allowed us to bring people back from the brink of death and, indeed, to blur the boundary between life and death.

Technological medical advances and societal acceptance in recent decades have helped to increase the number of reported near-death experiences, which commonly include a number of features that suggest the persistence of consciousness after the death of the body. These features include enhanced cognitive function in the presence of demonstrable brain dysfunction, accurate perceptions from a visual perspective out of the physical body, and apparent encounters with deceased spirits who often appear to welcome the experiencer to the afterlife or send the experiencer back to this life. Although some of these visions of the deceased may be attributed to expectation and wishful thinking, that explanation cannot account for "Peak in Darien" cases in which the deceased person seen was not known or expected to be dead.

Stevenson, in reporting one such case, noted some of the difficulties in his investigation. Although several witnesses may hear the dying person relate the vision, they rarely make any written record of the event before receiving corroboration that the person seen in the vision had indeed died. This lapse permits the explanation that the whole story might be a retrospective falsification of memory. Stevenson did not himself believe that to be plausible in all Peak in Darien cases, but acknowledged that the difficulties of obtaining reliable testimony dissuade many researchers from investing the extraordinary effort, time, and patience required to sift the evidence carefully (Stevenson 1959:22).

Despite these difficulties, Barrett concluded that the type of deathbed vision in which experiencers "appear to see and recognize some of their relatives of whose decease they were unaware, affords perhaps one of the strongest arguments in favour of survival" (Barrett 1926:10). Such cases cannot easily be explained as hallucinations based on expectation; in fact, the experiencer is usually quite surprised and sometimes puzzled by the vision of someone thought to be alive. In some of these cases, the appearance of the vision suggests strong motivation on the part of the deceased individual to communicate a message. As such, these Peak in Darien cases provide some of the most persuasive evidence for the ontological reality of deceased spirits. Recent medical and societal advances in end-of-life care offer favorable opportunities for the further investigation of these cases.

Notes

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